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ABSTRACT

Information about children's behavior in preschool and about the preschool program interests parents and provides them with useful information. Preschool teachers should make every effort to share their knowledge with parents whenever possible. How to communicate various types of information presents a major difficulty for teachers. Some information is personal (e.g., a child's misbehavior), whereas other information is public (e.g., the highlights of the week's activities). The use of a variety of written communications provides effective techniques for sharing these different types of information with parents. Written communications frequently take less teacher time and energy than do other methods of communication. Some teachers express themselves more clearly in writing than through other modes of communication, and thus often find writing a more effective method of communication. Parents benefit from written communication for various reasons. For example, they are better able to reflect on what is being said and they are able to schedule a time to read when they will not be distracted by their children. Types of written communication include notices, notes, letters, newsletters, pamphlets, and brochures. Each technique possesses strengths and limitations. For example, their one strength is that teachers can employ individual styles when using these techniques. When carefully planned, written communications help build more meaningful parent-teacher relationships. (Author/DB)

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BUILDING PARENT/TEACHER RELATIONS THROUGH WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

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Building Parent/Teacher Relations

Through Written Communication

There is never a dull moment in teaching! Consider the following hypothetical assessment of the week of four preschool children: Jerrod managed an entire week without biting! Susan was able to share the puzzles in the manipulative area for the first time this week. Aaron was unusually active and had a hard time sitting still for group time. Christie counted to ten without assistance! With some thought, teachers could probably list a special occurance for every child in their class. Each week it is the same. Children are growing and changing with great speed.

In addition to the individual changes occurring in children, many changes are taking place in the curriculum as well. Foot painting outdoors, the children's preparation of a nutriticus fruit salad for snack, and a field trip to a farm might well be the highlights of a week's activities.

All of this information is of interest to parents. Understanding what goes on at school with their child and with the program itself is informative and often useful. The teacher must make every effort to share his or her knowledge with parents whenever possible. The difficulty comes in knowing just how this information should be communicated. The highlights of the week's activities could be shared with all the parents, whereas Jerrod's success in avoiding biting is more personal. The use of a variety of written communications provides effective techniques for sharing these different types of information with parents.

Why Use Written Communications?

There are a wide variety of communication tools available for teachers to use in working with parents. Parent conferences, parent meetings, and home visits are three of the most popular techniques used. Despite their undisputed value, these techniques may not be appropriate for the intended message. In many situations, written communications are more effective for several reasons.

One important asset of written communications is that they frequently take less time and energy on the teacher's part. Many messages which need to be shared with all the parents in a particular class or school can be more efficiently communicated in written form. With the busy schedules all teachers face, this time savings can be invaluable.

Another strength of written communication is that some teachers express themselves more effectively in writing than when using other forms of communication. With written messages, the teacher can stop and carefully select words and phrases that most accurately reflect the intent of the communication. By rewriting, adding, and subtracting from a written draft, a teacher can clearly and concisely share valuable information with parents.

In addition to the fact that teachers can often communicate more effectively in writing, it is also true that many parents benefit from receiving written information from teachers. A school newsletter, for example, can be read and understood more effectively by the parent when the children are down for a nap or at the end of the day, without the many distractions that occur at other times. By re-reading and

thinking about the written communication, parents can often more clearly understand the written message. For the reflective parent, this can be an important asset for more effective communication.

Finally, just as it is important to use a variety of teaching techniques in working with children, it is best to use a variety of communication tools with parents. Each parent is a unique individual with special needs, interests, and preferences. In order to "reach" each of these individuals, a variety of techniques (including written communication) should be used.

Types of Written Communications

Written communications are extremely effective for building and strengthening home-school relationships. Yet they may well be the most under-rated and least effectively used forms of communication. Many teachers and schools do not fully understand the many different types of written communications that exist nor the variety of ways in which each can be used. Written communications include notices, notes, letters, newsletters, pamphlets, and brochures. Every form of written communication has its own particular strengths and uses, and these will be discussed in the paragraphs which follow.

Notices and Notes

The briefest and easiest to use forms of written communication are notices and notes. Both are usually no more than a paragraph or two in length and are quickly prepared by the teacher. Whereas notices are brief statements of interest to all parents in a group, notes are more personal

and intended for either a single family or a small group of parents.

Notices serve a variety of purposes. They can remind parents of special events at the school, clarify school or classroom procedures, keep parents informed about community events, or encourage parents to get involved in the activities of the class, to name just a few. Notices are particularly useful between issues of classroom newsletters. For example, a newsletter may be sent home every two weeks with occasional notices used in the interim to inform parents of the latest happenings of the school.

As mentioned earlier, notes tend to be more personal than notices. They are tailor-made to communicate with specific individuals. When used effectively, notes are extremely useful in strengthening parent/teacher relationships. To be successful, the topics for notes should be kept simple and communicate a single idea. Brevity and positive messages also make notes more effective. Wenig and Brown (1975) had two additional suggestions for meaningful notes to parents. They sent "Happy-Grams" to describe a positive accomplishment of the child. Each note ended with an invitation to come visit the school at any time. Another suggestion by the authors was to have children participate in making the notes. For an adult/child tea party, children dictated a special invitation to their parents encouraging them to attend.

Letters

Letters are another form of written communication for teachers to use in working with parents. Generally a page or two in length, letters can be used to communicate with individual parents or to parents as a group. Both

techniques are effective and can be used successfully by the creative teacher. One approach to the use of letters would be to have the first few directed towards parents as a group with subsequent correspondence having a more personalized touch. If this approach were used, the initial group letters could serve any or all of the following functions: introduce the teacher to parents, explain the goals and expectations of the classroom, outline classroom procedures, review how children are evaluated, or let the parent know they are welcome to observe or participate in the classroom (England, 1977).

Once the communication channels have been opened through the use of the group letter, more personalized letters may follow to strengthen home-school relationships. Such letters need not be complex or lengthy, but can express important messages not easily communicated in other ways. Fedderson (1972) suggested that one such message would be a letter to describe special activities that parents could use in working with their child at home. These activities help the parents feel they are taking an active part in their child's education.

As with notices, letters to parents can also be effectively used to supplement the more extensive and less frequent newsletter. A workable arrangement would be to have a monthly newsletter, with weekly letters to parents in between. The newsletter could then contain student work, plans for the following month, and other information that would be difficult to compile and disseminate on a weekly basis. The weekly letters would be easier to compose, while still keeping parents informed of events in the classroom.

Newsletter

A popular and effective written communication tool is the newsletter. Usually published semi-monthly or monthly, the newsletter provides a regular system for communicating with parents. It is usually planned and distributed according to a prearranged schedule, such as the first Friday of every month. Although newsletters are more complex and somewhat difficult to organize, they are warmly received by parents when they are well done.

One of the strengths of the newsletter is the diversity of materials (and contributors) which can be included in it. Fedderson (1972) suggests the following as possible materials to be included:

1) references and/or summaries of short articles of interest to parents.

2) messages from the school administrator(s).

3) a parent column written by parents to share thoughts and ideas with other parents.

4) a "help-wanted" section, asking for parent volunteers to assist with specific projects in the school.

5) a monthly want-ad section for items needed in the classroom.

Newsletters can also be effectively combined with brief personal notes to have a strong impact on parents. Wilson (1963) suggests writing these notes directly on the newsletter, which adds a personal touch to the communication and allows the teacher to make specific, pertinent comments about each child. Another possibility suggested by Wilson would be to have the newsletter contain an optional comment section for the parents to complete and return to the school. This would enable parents to give feedback about the information presented in the newsletter and would help overcome the one-way nature of this communication tool.

A frequent technique used for writing newsletters is to have the children themselves assist in the writing and production of the newsletter. In addition to the valuable learning experiences gained by the children, parents tend to show more interest when much of the work is done by children. Even the youngest of children can make important contributions which make the newsletter more valuable to parents.

Pamphlets and Brochures

Although seldom thought of as written communication tools, pamphlets and brochures provide excellent opportunities for building parent-teacher relations. These materials can come from four basic sources: governmental agencies (local, state, and national), private businesses, schools and school related organizations, and from the individual teacher. Each source should be utilized by the teacher to provide parents with the greatest variety and most appropriate pamphlets and brochures. The number and diversity of materials currently available for use is nearly overwhelming. The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (1977), for example, has listed over 3,000 different pieces of literature that are helpful to parents. The teacher's job, then, becomes one of sorting out those pamphlets and brochures that may be most useful to parents of children in his or her own classroom.

These written materials serve a variety of purposes. They can, for example, inform parents of valuable information on child growth and development. Other pamphlets and brochures are available on health and safety tips. Booklets on selecting toys for children and how to support the

school through activities in the home are also plentiful. In addition, governments and schools publish materials that describe goals and objectives for education at all levels.

Despite the wide diversity of written materials available through other sources, there are times when teacher-developed pamphlets are needed for the classroom. Such written materials require an initial investment of considerable time. Once in print, however, they can provide valuable assistance in communicating with other adults. One example of this type would be a classroom handbook containing basic information concerning philosophy, goals, and program elements.

In order to share with parents the many changes that are occurring in the classroom, teachers must use a variety of written communications. Each of the techniques described has its own strengths and limitations. In addition, every teacher will have his or her own way of using these techniques to enhance their individual teaching style. The resourceful teacher will be continually searching for new and more effective ways of using written communications. When they are carefully thought out and well written, these communications are a tremendous asset in building more meaningful parent-teacher relationships.

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